

Q: Good afternoon. Today is November 3rd, 2016. My name is Becca and I am here at Newton City Hall with Diane Tarr. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and Newton Senior Center. Okay. So, what is your connection to Newton?

A: I have lived in Newton for about 35 years. And the way I got to Newton was really by way of joining the Navy when I was in college at the University of Virginia, so that is my connection. I have lived here. I actually grew up in West Virginia right on the banks of the Ohio River. If you traveled 10 miles one way you were in Pennsylvania, if you crossed the river you were in Ohio, so it's in that funny little panhandle that sticks up. Very different sort of place.

One of the things I remember about it, because I was born in 1945, was that everybody that I went to high school with, all 110 kids that were in my graduating class, all of our families, fathers mostly had been, had served in World War Two, so that was sort of the military connection.

Q: Would you like to tell me about a few of your most memorable experiences, positive or negative, about the Navy?

A: Okay, sure. I'll go back a little bit. The reason I signed up basically was because I went to a three-year Nursing School in West Virginia. After I graduated and went to Richmond, Virginia I realized that I wasn't going to go anywhere in my career, so the Navy and my career were very much intertwined. So, I chose to go back to school to get a Baccalaureate, because I had what in those days was a diploma, and there aren't many of those diploma programs anymore, they're almost all Baccalaureate programs, so I went to the University of Virginia. I was one of the first women to be admitted into the undergraduate program there. It was a state school, but it was an all-male school. In Virginia schools were segregated by males and females for the most part in those days. Remember we're talking about 1969 now.

So, while I was there there were some guys in my nursing class, and the reason they were there was because they had either been medics and they had served in Vietnam or they were corpsmen, and they were really encouraging me instead of working three different jobs trying to put myself through undergraduate school that I join the military, which was a really difficult decision at the time, because here I was in college, Kent State had happened where seven kids were killed, shot during demonstrations by the National Guard, and here I was myself demonstrating against the war, not against the soldiers, the sailors, and other military people but against the war. But I did decide that I was going to be on the end of healing people and mending them, so I really wasn't aiding the war effort. That's how I rationalized it finally in my mind, but I told very few of my fellow students that I had made that decision, because I was a little bit ashamed, to tell you the truth.

So, at any rate, that's how I got connected with the military. And so after I finally got my Bachelor's degree I had to do my time then, and so I went to Newport, Rhode Island to Officers Candidate School, and again was one of, it was the first class that they had combined the men's and women's Officers training program, so we had to run the same obstacle courses, and it was really pretty grueling out there in November in the rain and the snow and marching, and we did all the same things that all the men did.

And plus some of the funny things that we did there was, I'm sure that is the first time that people had, because they integrated the classes and they integrated the dorms, which in 1972, this is 1972 now, and we had shaving cream battles and so on and so forth in the hallways, and we had a great time. It was a lot of fun. But the other thing was, this is, that I was really in a state of shock, because I didn't realize what I was getting into at all, and it was kind of, I don't know if you've ever heard of that movie *Private Benjamin*, that was sort of what it was like for me. I, fortunately, left my dog at home with my mom in West Virginia when I went to Newport, but I took my gerbils, and their names were Mama and Papa after the Mamas and the Papas, and I was

roommates with, they paired me up, rebel that I was, with a gal who happened to be Black who was from the south who was a Mustanger. In other words she had come up through the ranks, had shown such promise that the Navy put her into Officers training. She was a nurse too. And so the two of us were like so different, but we worked so hard together. Well, for inspections we would get down on the floor at 6:00 in the morning with a lint brush to take any lint that was on the floor, we had to shine. I mean we got a good idea of what it was like to be an enlisted person. We had to shine the bright work and stay in inspection.

And all this time I had these gerbils hidden in my room up in the closet, and I was so afraid, because at nighttime they would run around in their little, and make all this racket. And I then realized that I was going to be in a lot of trouble. And I was always the last person in at night, because I was out having such a good time. I was probably not the most perfect Officer there ever was. And the hardest thing to ever get used to was not just the rules and the regulations, it was like being back in my Diploma Nursing School when you had to be in like at 9:30 at night and in the Nursing School they would lean over the desk and smell your breath and make sure you hadn't had anything to drink or smoke. It was very strange.

Anyhow, it was like that all over again in Officers training. And finally when we had our final inspection they opened the closets and they opened the drawers and made sure that all your underwear was folded in a certain way, your uniforms were hanging, your shoes, the ties on your shoes were tied. And I had found some enlisted guy to take my gerbils, because I knew that was coming up. And he kept them for me until I finished. But it was like a major awakening for me of what I had gotten myself into and what I was going to have to do for the next three or four years was I was really going to have to zip up my mouth.

And getting used to people saluting me, I don't know how I ever made it to Lieutenant, I don't know, but the saluting me was really, it was an awkward thing. So I got-- I'm sorry, I rambled away. Anyhow, where were we?

Q: Any humorous experiences?

A: That was kind of funny. Looking back on it, those were some really funny times.

Q: Yeah. How did you join and why did you choose that specific branch of nursing?

A: Well, my dad had been in World War Two. He was in the Navy and he was in the CBs, and it's very funny that when I was growing up he used to say to me, and those were the times, "No daughter of mine is going to go to college, because you just want to go to college to get a husband." But fortunately my mother didn't want her daughter to ever have to be dependent on a man for an income, so she saw to it that I got to go to Nursing School and that was sort of the beginning of it. But because of him who, even though he said that, always stood beside me and was really very proud, and he was probably most proud when I finally used the GI Bill and got a Master's degree. So, he was very proud of me.

And in fact another one of the firsts, which is on my way to buying my house in Newton, in those days when I first graduated from Nursing School you couldn't buy a car, women could not buy a car of your own volition, my father had to sign to get me the car, and in order to buy this condominium in Boston after I got out of the Navy and was working, I had been working for quite a number of years, was a veteran, my father had to sign that if I defaulted on this mortgage, on this, I was in the first wave of buying condominiums in Boston, this was in about 1974, and my father had to cosign that too that if I defaulted he would pick up the mortgage payment. So that just gives you a little bit of the flavor of the times.

And I feel very lucky that I was born when I was born so that I could make as much out of my career and my personal life as I could, as any man could. So, we've come a long way.

Q: Do you want to talk a little bit about where exactly did you serve and do you remember arriving and like what it was like?

A: Well yes. We actually, one of our field trips from the Officers Training School down in Newport was we came to inspect an oil tanker, if you can imagine, my class of nurses, both male and female, we inspected, can you imagine, with white gloves inspecting an oil tanker. And then we also got to do a field trip to the USS Constitution, and while I was in Boston I decided that's where I wanted to be stationed, so that's how I happened to get to Chelsea Naval Hospital, and then stayed after Active Duty, because I fell in love with the city, and bought the condominium, then years down the road sold that and with that money was how I moved to Newton, how I bought the house in Newton and have been there ever since.

So, I am grateful to nursing and grateful to the Navy for getting me here. And as much of a rebel as I was in the Navy, I really did love it. I made some wonderful, wonderful friends and have a really, it was a really good nursing experience as well. Do you want me to tell you about some of my memorable experiences?

Q: Please. I would really love that, yes.

A: Okay. So, I have to say that one of my lessons that I learned, and I'm going to tell you about two incredible patients that I took care of, but while I was at Chelsea Naval Hospital we were in the middle of a big drive for the Presidency, which was almost as controversial as this Presidency is, and this was McGovern versus Richard Nixon, and Massachusetts was one of the few states that supported and went for Mr. McGovern. So in retribution to Massachusetts doing that President Nixon then decided to close down and decommission the First Naval District, which really struck a horrible financial blow to Boston, because it used to be you would be in downtown Boston and you would not walk a block without seeing a whole group of sailors in their white uniforms, and of course the Constitution was here, Chelsea Naval Hospital.

We received back at Chelsea Naval Hospital everybody who was coming home from the Vietnam War who came in from Germany. They got, the first place they came stateside was at Chelsea Naval Hospital. We had just had an incredible makeover of our intensive care unit. It was like top notch. And then Nixon decided to close everything down, including the Naval shipyard, and he moved it all to New Hampshire.

So, I was there during the decommissioning, and the other thing that I learned was they kept saying, "It's too expensive to move these things," all of the beds and all the equipment, and they just kept throwing stuff out. And so that was a political lesson that I learned from that, because it was a shame, it was a very, very old hospital, had been there since 1832, and I have pictures of it, by the way, so I learned about politics and that was about the time I was learning that I should have been more political all the time I was in Officers training, because they wouldn't have, I should have kept my big mouth shut during that time, and I did learn over time to be a little bit less outspoken and more respectful of the hand that was feeding me, so to speak.

So, I was there doing the decommissioning ceremony which was very, very sad, and people were, more and more patients were being shipped out to other places, more and more of my colleagues were being shipped out to other places, but I decided at that time I was not going to move to another part of the country. I really liked Boston, so I would get off the-- They gave us an early out, those people who didn't want to move, so I stayed on in the Reserves here.

But I was, I felt like I was incredibly fortunate to be part of the Receiving Committee when the POWs came back from Vietnam, and this is where they came, because this was the First Naval District, it was the first stop when people were coming from Europe. And so to see some of those people was just, I mean it will affect me forever, how these guys, and they were mostly all guys, they were all guys, how they had survived such torture and deprivation was incredible. And which leads me to the two people that I want to talk about and how they touched me.

While we, the hospital was winding down they moved a Lieutenant Commander, a very young Lieutenant Commander who had young children into the intensive care unit, because many of the other wards were like 60-bed open wards, which I have not seen before or since, where on those wards, and they were all males, we had a dependents building where women and children and childbirth and all, but I worked with the Active Duty people, where the people who were mending and people who were mended, they would move all the beds to one side of, and we took care of Navy, Air Force, not just Navy but Army, we were a full service hospital for all the branches, Marines, excuse me, Marines, I left you out, but they would move everybody to one side of the 60-bed ward, swab the decks every day, they would wash the floors, move everybody back, because the people that couldn't get out of bed, but the able-bodied people. The guys were working, they were patients, but they were well patients waiting to go back to their ships or wherever they were going, and then they would do the other side and then move everybody back.

So, this Lieutenant Commander, they moved him to the intensive care unit where I was working at the time, and he was comatose by the time he was there. He had liver cancer. And so looking back on it it was somehow he exposed to Agent Orange or something in the military that made him so young, he was only like 34, 35, and he was dying, he was comatose. Well, I took care of him every day on the evening shift for about 10 days, and I went to turn him over and his eyes popped open, and he looked at me, and he was as clear as can be, coming out of this coma. And he said to me, "Am I going to die?" That was the first time in my career I had had anybody, first time, not the last time, ask me directly, so I was sort of fumbling. And I knew that he was going to die and soon.

So, I'm mumbling. I'm at a loss for words. And he said, "Don't give me any bullshit." He said, "Am I going to die?" And I said, "Yes, Sir, but you have some time to take care of all the business that you take care of. Your wife and children are coming in. Your brother comes in every day. And so you have some time to settle your life issues with them." And he said, "Thank

you.” And he went back into his coma. And the next day I came in and I said, “What happened with So-and-So?” And the nurses said that when his wife came in he woke up again, he talked to her, they had a chance to say goodbye to each other, and his children, he had young children. That was when I said, “You know what, I really want to be in oncology nursing later on down the road,” because it was really a very, very moving experience.

And so we all, all the nurses got very close to him and his family and his brother painted, his brother was a painter and he painted for each of us little pictures of sites in Boston, which was a very sweet thing, and brought them in after he had passed away, and so on and so forth.

And the other story was having to be in the Navy, if you have any skills in anything and there is nobody else around who has any better skills than you you’re put in charge of it. The first lesson you learn in Officers training is don’t volunteer, however, because you will be volunteered anyhow. So, this had to do with the locked psychiatric ward, and as it turned out I was the only Officer, Nurse Officer who had any experience in psychiatry. However, my experience before I joined the Navy, I was, I worked in a psychiatric unit for children. It was an inpatient psychiatric unit for children who were mostly behavioral kinds of problems and they were all institutionalized, they had to be there. So that was my experience, not with adults.

But at any rate, so they made the Head Nurse of the locked psychiatric unit, people who were really psychotic. And the one person I remember, two men I remember, one it was so sad, this guy, he had been in the Army, we could not keep him out of the garbage cans. He kept climbing into the garbage can. He said, “Leave me in the trash. I am trash. Leave me in the trash. Leave me in the garbage. Take me out with the garbage.” We would all go and we would haul him out and take him back to his room, try and soothe him, and the next thing we knew he was back in some, standing in some trashcan or garbage can.

And I don't know what happened to him during Vietnam, but it made me realize that there are people in every war, and Vietnam especially, because the soldiers and everybody who served during that war was so looked down upon for so long, and that's why another reason I was afraid to tell anybody. People, I lived in Bay Village in downtown Boston and I was afraid to tell people that I was in the Navy. But that poor guy, I mean it ruined his life. I don't know whatever happened to him, because as the hospital was slowly closing down one of the first units to close down was the locked psychiatric unit and they moved them elsewhere, but it just made me realize what a mess war can make, people not just physically but emotionally. And I mean we still have a lot of Vietnam vets who are homeless, who are alcoholics, who it's just very sad.

So that was another experience that I had with patients at Chelsea Naval Hospital, and I wanted to share because they were some tough lessons to learn and people don't think about all that some folks have given so that we can enjoy what we have today, not just Vietnam but all of the veterans who have served.

Q: Let's see. Well, you talked about how it affected, how you've seen how the war mentally and physically affected soldiers. How do you think it affected your life and your outlook on life?

A: Well, I have a much greater appreciation for the military. I have a much greater appreciation for growing up in this country and for all the privileges we have and for better or for worse. I mean we have our faults, this country does, but I just hope even, I really would hope and pray that down the road a piece, even a hundred years from now that people have not lost sight of how lucky we are to have been born and raised here or to have been able to immigrate here and become integrated into our society with all of the rights and privileges that we have. And I just hope that our good people continue to, like we have been known, to give back to the world, really.

We have given so much to the world, again with our, we're not perfect, but this is the best place to be and I wouldn't be any other place. And so that is how it has affected me. I have regretted-- I have regretted being such a rebel in the military as I was. I was so bad. I graduated last in my Officers training because I back-talked and questioned, but that has also gotten me to be, that was part of my generation of women which was to question and demonstrate and burn our bras and be the first at everything we could be. And I just hope that people don't forget that we, that most of us who have struggled to, whether it's because of our race or because of our sex, that there were times when things were not so great and we didn't have choices, like my mother did not have.

So, I have a whole different philosophy. And certainly as far as the Vietnam vets are concerned there is a much different attitude now toward them, and I go to all of those functions. They had a parade and all Vietnam veterans walked in the parade, a lot of them. The only thing I worry about is there a lot of-- I mean I wasn't affected like somebody who was-- I'm a Vietnam era vet, which is different than Vietnam vets. Those people had what we called boots on the ground and what some of those people went through-- I mean I have a neighbor who will not talk about it. He is a very negative, very sad person. He is a Vietnam vet. He was in the Army and he will not get any help for his PTSD. And I know that he has PTSD. I mean he is a functioning person, and there are many people from Iraq and so on and so forth who have PTSD. And so I just want to do all that I can do to try and get some of those people taken care of.

And now I'm turning inward and now that I'm retired after being a nurse for about 54 years I'm trying to work with some of the veterans. I work through the Post for 40 American Legion which tries to do a lot to help veterans. I still hate war and I hate the fact that humans have to fight to defend our way of life and put themselves in potentially potential harm's way, and I am no longer ashamed that I was part of the military.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to say?

A: I think I just covered about everything.

Q: Would you like to talk about the photos you brought in?

A: Oh. This, I just wanted to say again this was one of those firsts. I was lucky to be there at the time. When I first graduated from Officers Training I mean we had to wear white nursing uniforms like all nurses did in those days, and there is a picture here, one you can see, we wore our caps with our rank on the top so that if you were outside, only on the outside, by the way, do people salute you, when you're outdoors and you have your cover on. So, this is my Lieutenant stripes, but you can see, can you imagine taking care of people, emptying bed pans, having these long sleeves, starched white uniforms and so on and so forth, because that is part of being a nurse, but then they went from this to we actually got pants suits.

And again going back to when I was a young nurse in my Diploma School, you could not stand out in front of your dorm in pants. You had to come and go in skirts. That's 1965 era. But you can see these are much more comfortable uniforms, pants suits, so we actually got pants suits while I was in the Navy, which was great, because can you imagine climbing under beds and doing all that kind of stuff that you have to do as a working nurse as opposed to these skirts, long skirts?

And we did have uniforms which were comfortable when we weren't working. Where are those other pictures? I want to show you the other, those. That is with my dad and my dog. That's me. And we looked like other military people when we were not on duty but at some other function. We wore, these were called our dress blues.

Q: That's great. One last question before we wrap up. So, a hundred years from now is there anything you would like people to know, one final thing?

A: Well, I think this is sort of a little redundant, I think, but I just hope that a hundred years from now I hope there aren't any more wars, but that has been going on since caveman days, so I think that is a little idealistic. But the thing that I hope is that for our society that there are still, that there are still people who are mostly, most people in our society are good people, they will help others, whether it be financially, whether it be some disaster, people pack up and go and help. And I just, I hope our society does not lose that generosity of spirit that we have been known for, and people who will put themselves in harm's way so that other people can live a good and happy, prosperous life.

I worry sometimes that that is going to be lost. But now I'm talking like an old lady, I suppose. But I do hope that, I mean that there will always be people around who will be good and giving, especially when people have to step up and take a stand to save others.

Q: Thank you so much for taking the time to do this with us.

A: You're welcome. I was so nervous.

Q: We were really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: Thank you. I appreciate the fact that I was able to support, sort of combine some of the history of nursing along with my military service. They really go hand in hand.

END OF INTERVIEW